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Misfit

Xu Lizhi and Battlers Poetry (*Dagong shige*)

ABSTRACT Battlers poetry (*dagong shige* 打工詩歌), a genre whose name has mostly been rendered in English as “migrant worker poetry” to date, presents an important development in Chinese literature since the 2000s. Written by members of a new precariat that plays a key role in China’s economic growth, this poetry speaks to the plight of its constituency. Xu Lizhi 許立志 (1990–2014) is one of its best-known authors, whose rise to fame was triggered if not caused by his suicide. While it is impossible to conduct a real discussion of Xu’s work without referring to his suicide and the story of the migrant workers, his status as a figurehead of battlers poetry at large raises questions because what he wrote is arguably not very representative of the genre at all. These observations lead to a discussion of the way battlers poetry has been framed in Chinese critical discourse, where it is often said to have high social significance but low aesthetic value. This convenient dyad is unsatisfying in that it simplifies the text’s relation to reality—which is more highly charged for battlers poetry than for many other literary genres.

KEYWORDS Xu Lizhi, battlers poetry, subaltern literature, migrant workers, *dagong*

THREE BONES

o stranger, walk with me no further
and take what last night I collected
from inside my body: three bones

陌生人，請留步
請收下我昨晚從身體裡
取出的三根骨頭

the first a pickax to help you reclaim
the fields and your heart for the years
you have left

第一根可作鋤頭，助你開墾
餘生的田園和內心

and the second, hold it tight
money can’t buy you a cane like this,
so lean on it

第二根你拿穩了
這拐杖千金難買，你拄著它

and fear and dread no more as night
falls on this life

在生活的夜色裡再不用擔驚受怕

and the last one, look after it well
and a year from today when darkness
comes

最後一根請保管好
等明年今日天黑時

stick it deep in the jungly weeds on my grave. 插在我荒草萋萋的墳頭¹

The speaker in this poem is on his way out from this life. He removes essential parts of his own body and presents these as a gift to someone who is seeing him off or bidding him farewell, but who is still a stranger. The gift establishes a connection between the speaker and the stranger and comes with advice and instructions, like a bequeathal. The speaker offers lessons for a life from which he himself is about to depart and asks the stranger to commemorate his death in return. Death will come soon or is here already, for his grave will be overgrown a year from today.

“Three Bones” 三根骨頭 (San gen gutou), dated November 1, 2013, is an original poem. Its central image is convincing in the transformation of the bones into physical objects for tilling the land, supporting oneself and warding off danger, and commemorating a human life—and in the political notion of solidarity not just across generations but between strangers, with one who dies giving one who lives on a tool for livelihood (pickaxe), self-protection (cane), and an expression of community (grave marker). The poem’s solemnity works well with the flow of the language, its melancholy tone, and the sense of letting go that the text exudes. As such, the line break that sets “grave” apart to conclude the poem has an artistic credibility that transcends mere technical cleverness.

Where the Text Ends; or, To Where the Text Extends

In 1993, Michelle Yeh published an essay on “Asian Copper” 亞洲銅 (Yazhou tong), one of the best-known poems of Haizi 海子 (1964–89).² Yeh’s reading of the poem leads to a lucid discussion of Haizi’s oeuvre and its place in contemporary mainland-Chinese poetry.³ She never mentions the poet’s suicide—which, at the time, had squeezed out other perspectives on Haizi in deafening fashion.

The topos Yeh so pointedly avoids has been with us forever in various cultural traditions. I mean the death of the poet, of “unnatural” causes, preferably violent and tragic, and its tendency to block out what the poet actually wrote. Suicide is, of course, the perfect example. In China, it is rooted in the lore of Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 343–278 BCE), said to have drowned himself in the river Miluo—regardless of the fact that Qu Yuan was a statesman before anything else and thus a different animal from the modern poet, of his modern political appropriation in the name of patriotism, and of the verifiability of his biography. In one of its more furious manifestations elsewhere, the death of the poet features centrally in the European romanticism that continues to fall on fertile ground in China.⁴

Against this backdrop, Yeh’s marked silence on Haizi’s suicide usefully reminds us that we do not read his poetry just because he killed himself, even though this is what caused his posthumous apotheosis. “Three Bones,” the poem

cited above, is by Xu Lizhi 許立志 (1990–2014), another in a long list of suicides in contemporary Chinese poetry and another who enjoyed a meteoric rise to fame after his death. Of course, the message of Yeh's essay is not just about Haizi. Yet, the circumstances of Xu's poetry and his poethood move me to raise the awkward question again and to add another. Do we read Xu's poetry just because he killed himself—and perhaps, in a vector that is not at play for Haizi, just because he was a migrant worker and his story perfectly captures the suffering of the subaltern?

For both Haizi and Xu Lizhi, when they were alive, their readership was of the in-crowd type, but Xu's in-crowd was different from Haizi's. In terms taken from Chinese critical discourse, Xu was an amateur (*yeyu* 業餘) or nonspecialist (*fei zhuan* 非專業) poet, and Haizi was a specialist (*zhuan* 專業) poet.⁵ As such, it is likely that by and large, in the aforesaid terminology—which I continue to use below—Xu's readers were amateur readers, and Haizi's were specialist readers.

When Haizi was alive, most of his readers would have identified with a community that counts as a cultural elite in terms of education, access to foreign literatures, and cultural capital more broadly. This elite had emerged from underground poetry circuits during the Cultural Revolution and was initially defined by its dissocation from state-sanctioned, official (*guanfang* 官方) quarters of the poetry scene, which it would soon outshine. The poets and critics in question are generally referred to as avant-garde (*xianfeng* 先鋒).⁶ Haizi was not as widely known as the celebrities among the obscure (*menglong* 朦朧) poets who make up the avant-garde's first generation (e.g., Bei Dao 北島 [1949–], Shu Ting 舒婷 [1952–], and Gu Cheng 顧城 [1956–93]), but he was certainly up there with the best-known authors in later groups and trends that came to the fore after the mid-1980s. Already during his lifetime, his work featured prominently in influential journals and anthologies.

Not so for Xu Lizhi. Xu is closely associated with battlers poetry (*dagong shige* 打工詩歌), a genre that can be traced back to the 1990s and has gained in visibility and impact since the 2000s.⁷ Written by members of a new precariat that plays a key role in China's economic growth, this poetry speaks, in a nutshell, to the plight of its constituency. (To date, it has mostly been called “[rural] migrant worker poetry” in English, after the Chinese *nongmingong shige* 農民工詩歌, but for reasons explained elsewhere I believe “battlers poetry” works better.⁸) The blog where Xu posted his work between late 2010 and mid-2014 would mostly have been visited by fellow authors and other battlers (*dagongzhe* 打工者). Beyond his blog, his poetry was hardly published during his lifetime, a rare exception being the unofficial journal *Dagong shiren* 打工詩人 (The Battler Poet), which carried four of his poems in October 2011.⁹ His work was not included in the successive *Zhongguo dagong shige jingxuan* 中國打工詩歌精選 (Best of China's Battlers Poetry) anthologies edited by Xu Qiang 許強 (1973–) and Chen Zhongcun 陳忠村 (1975–)—not, that is, until after an explosion of publicity in the general media when he ended his

life on September 30, 2014, by jumping from the seventeenth floor of a high-rise near the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen.¹⁰ Similarly, what little there is in the way of academic and literary commentary on his work appeared after this death.¹¹

As such, Xu Lizhi's renown is a direct consequence of his suicide, even more so than for Haizi. Notably, however, it is the product of a different discursive mechanism. Haizi's story foregrounds a regular-romantic vision of the death of the poet—preferably by suicide—where the poet ultimately dies of poetry, regardless of the circumstances of death. The poet's spectacular demise becomes a function of poethood, observed or imagined as an unsustainable, self-destructive intensity of life. Think hypersensitivity, exaltation, depression, substance abuse, rebellion, deviance, exile in the broadest sense, and so on—but also a maniacal, almost sacrificial devotion to the art that can resemble martyrdom.¹²

By contrast, for Xu Lizhi, inasmuch as the standard version of this vision is now linked to his name, I would venture that this is mostly projection, on the cusp of public indignation unleashed not so much by the death of the poet as by the death of the migrant worker employed at Foxconn who was also a poet. Mediagenic, iconic scenes of migrant labor lend themselves well to (often patronizing and misguided) romanticization, with the underdog's hardship boosting the authenticity of their experience: dark-skinned rural people squatting outside railway stations with their bedding folded into cheap traveling bags, tiny yellow-helmeted human figures clinging to the scaffolding around the skeleton of the next skyscraper, face-masked robotized workers shackled to the assembly line. When these people turn out to be poets, this can conjure up a stereotype of the battler as a noble savage in the realm of poetry.

Foxconn is one of the world's largest manufacturers of electronics, headquartered in Taiwan. The Shenzhen plant, whose output includes Apple iPhones, is infamous for its brutal labor regime and the number of its employees who have killed themselves over the last decade or so. The Foxconn suicides have become a metonym for the social injustice associated with the hard lot of the migrant workers as the underside to China's economic miracle, with the Pearl River Delta as the workshop of the world.¹³ As noted above, in a very different sociocultural setting in the same Reform-era China, suicides have also been frequent in poetry circles. It was the combination of Foxconn and poetry that took Xu Lizhi's suicide into the general media: beyond labor activism, beyond the poetry scene, and beyond China. The best example is a long, angry piece of journalism by Emily Rauhala in *Time*, called "The Poet Who Died for Your Phone."

In the spirit of Yeh's essay on Haizi, I have upstaged the discursive force field of suicide + migrant worker icon + Foxconn + poethood, by starting with a text-focused discussion of "Three Bones," without bringing in the fate of its author—or, rather, before doing so, for I have not extended the exercise beyond administering a pinprick in the opening paragraphs of the present essay. This is

because, different from Haizi, it strikes me as impossible to conduct a sustained discussion of Xu's poetry, meaning both what he wrote and why and how it was published, without referring to his suicide and the story of the migrant workers with which it is entwined.

At the same time, Xu's status in relation to battlers poetry at large raises questions. While the aforesaid, composite force field made him one of the figureheads of battlers poetry overnight, his work is arguably not very representative of the genre at all, and strikingly different from that of other prominent authors such as Zheng Xiaoqiong 鄭小瓊 (1980–), Guo Jinniu 郭金牛 (1966–), and Xie Xiangnan 謝湘南 (1974–) in how it relates to the story of the migrant workers. I substantiate these claims below and conclude with a discussion of the ways in which battlers poetry has been framed in Chinese critical discourse. This often involves a convenient but ultimately unsatisfying dyad of high social significance and low aesthetic value that erases the complexity of the relation between word and world in this poetry, that is, between the literary text and what we usually refer to as reality.

Form and Language

Similar to other poet-suicides such as Haizi, Luo Yihe 駱一禾 (1961–89), Ge Mai 戈麥 (1967–91), and Gu Cheng, when Xu Lizhi killed himself this led to the publication of his oeuvre by a prestigious publishing house.¹⁴ In March 2015, the Beijing-based Writers Press put out *Xin de yi tian* 新的一天 (A New Day), edited by Qin Xiaoyu 秦曉宇, based on Xu's blog: 236 pages of poetry, with a 25-page preface and a 3-page afterword by the editor. As individual poetry collections go, this is a big book, certainly if measured against the brevity of Xu's career as a poet and his amateur status. The quality of the collection is uneven. The dates accompanying the poems show that Xu wrote in bursts, sometimes producing several similar poems in the space of a day or two. One wonders whether the editor should have opted for selection over completeness. Then again, under the circumstances, the psychology behind the desire for completeness—or, the anxiety over incompleteness—is understandable.

Xu Lizhi writes in free verse. The operation of poetic form in his work, in the overarching sense of the predictable repetition of language elements, is mostly limited to enumeration:¹⁵ for instance, of five different ways of killing oneself in “Death of the Poet” 詩人之死 (Shiren zhi si [163]; yes, Xu has a poem of this name). Trusting that the poem's title will facilitate the right interpretation, my translation takes some lexical liberties in order to echo a series of disyllables in the original:

a train	臥軌	(literally “lay down on the tracks”)
a rope	上吊	(“hang oneself”)
a pill	服毒	(“take poison”)

a knife 割腕 (“slash one’s wrists”)
a leap 跳樓 (“jump off a building”)

Or in “Shenzhen Shenzhen” 深圳深圳 (Shenzhen Shenzhen [197]), where a list of the city’s landmarks in the first stanza—mostly middle-class and tourist fare—is followed by a second stanza that is a list, or a litany, of blue-collar hells of various kinds. I call it so because of the way factories tend to be portrayed in poetry by Xu and other battler poets. Here is the second stanza:

shoe factories	electroplate factories	mold factories
electronics factories	plastics factories	paper factories
wire rod factories	furniture factories	brick factories
toy factories	hardware factories	printing factories
appliance factories	motor factories	clothing factories
knitting factories	product factories	meat factories.

While the most-stressed syllables in each of the items make for a discernible rhythm in English, the Chinese is visually and sonically more effective, as all factories are three syllables in size:

鞋材廠	電鍍廠	模具廠
電子廠	塑料廠	造紙廠
線材廠	家具廠	磚頭廠
玩具廠	五金廠	印刷廠
電器廠	馬達廠	服裝廠
針織廠	製品廠	肉聯廠.

Xu’s strongest poems notwithstanding, his language usage is sometimes imbalanced, when his diction is repetitive or veers back and forth between different registers (colloquial, bureaucratic, stately) for no obvious reason, or he fails to avoid cliché, or becomes explanatory, abstract, and unimaginative in a way that sucks the energy from the poem. Recalling the discussion of his amateur authorship at these moments, one could say that he writes in what would conventionally count as amateur language—which does not detract from the originality of his work or the recognizability of his voice. This is neither a value judgment nor the reflection of a belief in intrinsic differences between literary and nonliterary texts.¹⁶

Also, it should be considered in light of Xu’s background (and of the nature of battlers poetry at large, to which I return below). Xu grew up in Jieyang, in rural Guangdong. After graduating from high school, he left home in search of work and ended up at Foxconn in Shenzhen, where he first worked on the assembly line and later in logistics. While he was intensely interested in literature, his

attempts to make it a structural part of his life—for instance, by applying for jobs in bookstores and libraries—did not work out. In all, he would not have had anything resembling the high-cultural resources available to most specialist poets and their specialist readers, in terms of family background, tertiary education, reading, and literary networks.

For purchase on the questions of what Xu's poetry wants to be and do and how it relates to battlers poetry at large, we need to turn to its subject matter and thematics. I first focus on two core domains that are common in the works of other authors as well and then move on to material that sets Xu apart from battlers poetry at large.

At this point, it bears noting that there are generally good grounds for equating the speakers and protagonists in battlers poetry with its authors, if not for exact biographical detail then minimally as regards the range and the orientation of their human experience; also, this poetry regularly features protagonists named after its authors. These observations inform my choices in gendering the pronouns for the speakers in the work of Xu and others after their authors—and they speak to bigger issues in what I have summarized as the relation between word and world. This relation is more highly charged for battlers poetry than for many other literary genres. The world behind this poetry is a cruel place, and this has social, ethical, and psychological implications for the various parties who engage with it, including the researcher/translator.

The Physical Sites of Battler Life and Dehumanization

The first of the said two domains is that of the physical sites of battler life, especially the factory, one of the commonest settings encountered in battlers poetry. Some commentators, including Qin Xiaoyu, subsume battlers poetry under workers poetry (*gongren shige* 工人詩歌), a category that also encompasses the political lyric (*zhengzhi shuqing shi* 政治抒情詩) of the Mao era.¹⁷ In Mao-era poetry, the factory is a site of the secure livelihood, human dignity, power, and dedication of the workers, whose well-being is central to government policy. By contrast, the factory as it appears in battlers poetry is more like a prison of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Chinese precariat. In postsocialist China, labor conditions can be grueling. Migrant workers face uncertain prospects, low pay, and long hours; health, safety, and security issues; discrimination and abuse; and rights violations ranging from unpaid wages to the restriction of movement. Scholars, activists, and journalists have argued that in some cases this constitutes slavery.¹⁸ And battlers poetry originated not as a state-sanctioned and -directed genre but from the bottom up, in unofficial, occasional texts produced on the shop floor and in factory dormitories.¹⁹

Zheng Xiaoqiong, for instance, the most prominent of the battler poets—and one whose literary career has made her a specialist poet, if we go by her publi-

cation record and her membership in the Writers Association—is one of many authors in whose work the factory is emphatically present.²⁰ Drawing on her experience as a worker in Dongguan, her work stands out by its intense descriptions of the harsh materiality of the workplace, where the (gendered) body is punished by menial work. Zheng’s mid-2000s breakthrough on the national literary scene sharply raised the visibility of battlers poetry. A speech she gave after receiving a literary award in 2007 is remembered for the macabre image of forty thousand fingers severed in work accidents in the Pearl River Delta lined up in a row. Her poetry brims with energy and defiance, even as the speaker describes the almost unimaginable hardship around her. While the speaker shows her sorrow, she directs attention away from herself and takes on the role of a spokeswoman for others instead—which is precisely what Zheng has done outside her writing as well, in advocating for the betterment of the lives of female workers.²¹

Xu Lizhi also writes about the factory in a personal voice, but in a markedly different way from Zheng. While Xu’s poetry also refers to the historical reality of young people suffering in the workplace, its descriptions of factory life often lead to sudden turns in the poem, where the poet’s vision jumps out from the normalcy of the factory surroundings. This does not lead to anything like an escape. To the contrary, the speaker often still ends up trapped in one way or another. In “Terracotta Army on the Assembly Line” 流水線的兵馬俑 (Liushuixian de bingmayong [198]), this happens through reference to the tomb of the First Emperor, outside Xi’an. The speaker lists the names of ten “battlers who work night and day” 不分晝夜的打工者, including one named Xu Lizhi, and observes how, clad in antistatic clothing,

they quietly await their orders	靜候軍令
and at the ring of the bell	只一響鈴工夫
all return to the Qin dynasty,	悉數回到秦朝

implying that they are literally buried in factory work.

In other poems, the turn in the text is of a more personal nature. The scene in “Battler Life” 打工生活 (Dagong shenghuo [15]) also unfolds on the assembly line, where

the lead worker says	師傅說
this is the high-speed mouter, that is the	這是高速機，那是泛用機
multi-function mouter	
that’s the loader, that’s the vice-clamp.	這是載具，那是治具

The typical Xu Lizhi moment comes when the speaker continues, abruptly, “but everything I see / is ice cold” 可我看到的/全是冰冷. The synesthetic image distances him from the machinery but also brings out his helplessness in the face of it, at a level of personal experience that is far removed from the public discourse

on social injustice with which battlers poetry is habitually associated. The poem then highlights the psychology of an irredeemable loss of dignity, when

the line leader says, you all came here to work	線長說，都是出來打工的
no one forced you	沒人逼你
and I am tied by those words	我被這句話捆綁在
to a pillar of shame as I remember	回憶的恥辱柱上
and carefully count all those	細數那些
years I'll never get back.	再回不去的歲月

Besides the factory, key physical sites of battler life include the places where the workers stay—homes would not be the right word. In “They Say” 他們說 (Tamen shuo [14]), the speaker sits in a dormitory and jots down the names of his fellow workers’ faraway hometowns, describing the dreams they have of going back and finding sustainable work once they have made enough money to get married, raise a family, build a house, and so on. He says:

I’m like an eavesdropper in the	我像一個竊聽者，在角落裡記下他們說的
corner recording what they say	
each character is bright red, blots	字字鮮紅，然後洩開，凋謝
out, then withers and falls	
as pen and paper crash from my	手上的紙和筆叭嗒落地
hands to the ground.	

The poem shows him as part of the workers’ community but simultaneously sets him apart from it, and it signals his despondency at the chance that their dreams will come true. “Brother Fa” 發哥 (Fa Ge [200]) zooms in on an individual worker whose future is destroyed by his literally backbreaking labor. In the end, Brother Fa’s spirit also breaks, when he cries:

I’m pushing thirty	我還不到三十歲
still have no girlfriend	還沒交過女朋友
no family no career	還沒成家立業
this life is over.	這輩子，就算完了

“Rural-to-Urban Labor Migrant” 進城務工者 (Jin cheng wugongzhe [146]), written in July 2013, portrays another one of the typical settings in battlers poetry, namely, the migrant worker’s journey into, and out of, the city. Xu’s negotiation of this subject matter stands out by its conciseness, original imagery, and a sense of failure that is not primarily a public indictment of inequality but, rather, an utterly forlorn, personal experience:

many years ago	多年前
with a bag on his back	他背上行囊
he set foot in this	踏上這座
bustling metropolis	繁華的都市

full of vim and vigor	意氣風發
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many years later	多年後
with his ashes in his hands	他手捧自己的骨灰
he stands at the city's	站在這城市的
crossroads	十字路口

lost every which way.	茫然四顧
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“Rural-to-Urban” deploys effective repetition and parallelism. This adds to its ability to transcend a descriptive, direct-report-like style that characterizes large swaths of battlers poetry. And in this poem, Xu’s switches between various registers work well. The title is impersonal officialese, and the body of the poem is mostly colloquial, but the literary register of the contrasting, one-line stanzas “full of vim and vigor” and “lost every which way” stand out as key descriptions of the worker’s undoing. The poem hinges on the juxtaposition of the iconic traveling bag, as a vessel containing the protagonist’s life on his way in, with the image of “his ashes in his hands” on his way out, at once fantastic and chilling.

A second popular domain of subject matter and thematics in battlers poetry of which Xu Lizhi’s poetry partakes is that of dehumanization. This umbrella notion covers various subthemes, including that of the cultural, civic, and legal maltreatment and discrimination of migrant workers. Here, I focus on the phenomenon of exhaustion, as not just something that can happen to a human being but, rather, a symptom of the systematic exploitation that underlies the migrant workers’ social status and experience. In addition to the everyday meaning of exhaustion as extreme fatigue, its other denotations are equally relevant: depriving something or someone of a valuable quality or constituents (here: rights, health, dignity) and consuming something or someone entirely.

Xu has an early poem whose title translates as “Exhaustion” 疲倦 (Pijuan [16]), in the sense of fatigue. Written in June 2011, it starts out by telling rather than showing but reaches an original vision in the final two lines, when the exhaustion of young workers, “full to overflowing / spills across the floor” 這滿滿溢出的疲倦/滴了一地, quite literally bringing to mind a sweatshop environment but also evoking an eerie image of exhaustion as a toxic liquid secreted by the body it destroys. Here, “Exhaustion” serves as a foil for a longer, later poem, to illustrate how profoundly Xu’s poetry develops during the few years in which

he regularly wrote and published. Both exhaustion in its various senses and the broader notion of dehumanization are on display in “I Speak of Blood” 我談到血 (Wo tandao xue [160–61]), written in September 2013:

I speak of blood, for I have no choice	我談到血，也是出於無奈
I'd prefer to chat about the wind the flowers the snow the moon	我也想談談風花雪月
about dynasties of old and the classical poetry found in spirits	談談前朝的歷史，酒中的詩詞
but reality means I can only speak of blood	可現實讓我只能談到血
blood with its source in rented rooms like matchboxes	血源自火柴盒般的出租室
narrow, cramped, sunless year round	這裡狹窄，逼仄，終年不見天日
squeezing in the battler boys and battler girls	擠壓著打工仔打工妹
wives gone astray and husbands far from home	失足婦女異地丈夫
guys from Sichuan hawking spicy soup	賣麻辣燙的四川小夥
old Henanese selling trinkets on streetside blankets	擺地攤的河南老人
and then me toiling all day to survive	以及白天為生活而奔波
and opening my eyes at night to write poetry	黑夜裡睜著眼睛的我
I speak to you of these people, I speak of us	我向你們談到這些人，談到我們
ants struggling through the swamp of life one by one	一支支在生活的泥沼中掙扎 的螞蟻
drops of blood walking the battler's road one by one	一滴滴在打工路上走動的血
blood chased away by city guards or wrung out by machines	被城管追趕或者機台絞滅的血
scattering insomnia, disease, job loss, suicide along the way	沿途撒下失眠，疾病，下崗，自殺
words exploding one by one	一個個爆炸的詞彙
in the Pearl River Delta, in the belly of the motherland	在珠三角，在祖國的腹部
dissected by reams of paperwork, like seppuku blades	被介錯刀一樣的詞單解剖著
I speak of all this to you	我向你們談到這些
and even as my voice grows hoarse and my tongue breaks off	縱然聲音啞啞，舌頭斷裂
I will tear through the silence of this era	也要撕開這世代的沈默

I speak of blood and the sky will shatter	我談到血，天空破碎
I speak of blood and my mouth turns	我談到血，滿嘴鮮紅
bright red.	

This poem is atypical, as it employs the angry tone of an indictment of social injustice that is otherwise rare in Xu's oeuvre. Exceptionally, his use of the word *you* makes the reader a fellow human being who is complicit in accepting, reproducing, and reinforcing the extreme inequality of today's world—in China, and in the many places that products made in China flow to. The poem addresses the plight of the migrant workers explicitly and directly, without the ambiguity, private symbolism, or defamiliarization that are associated with poetry in other settings (including the Chinese avant-garde). Toward the end, the poem becomes an undiluted *j'accuse*. In "I will tear through the silence of this era," the word rendered as "silence" means that people choose not to speak—as in speak up against injustice—rather than merely the absence of sound.

That said, the text makes several references to poetry that are characteristic of Xu Lizhi, at a metalevel that is uncommon in battlers poetry. "The wind the flowers the snow the moon" is a common expression for trite poetry subjects. "And me toiling by day just to survive / and opening my eyes at night to write poetry" shows that poetry is what matters to the speaker and implies that his eyes are closed, and he is (mentally) asleep in the daytime, during his mind-numbing work shifts. More in line with most other battlers poetry, the work is described by the word *benbo* 奔波, "be (constantly) on the move," but also "work hard for a living," here rendered as "toiling to survive." In its second half, at the same time as identifying with the migrant worker community ("I speak of *us*"), the poem offers some striking images: ants struggling through the swamp of life, blood wrung out of bodies by machines that operate the workers rather than the other way around, and the speaker's tongue breaking off and his mouth turning red. The reader will trace this redness to the blood that oozes out as the speaker's tongue breaks off, but it also stands for the blood of the battler community at large, a life force exploited for national pride and corporate profit even as it flows from the wounds of the workers, literally and metaphorically.

Dehumanization is famously manifest in "A Screw Falls to the Ground" 一顆螺絲掉在地上 (Yi ke luosi diao zai di shang [214]), written in January 2014:

a screw falls to the ground	一顆螺絲掉在地上
in this night of overtime	在這個加班的夜晚
it drops straight down, with a faint sound	垂直降落，輕輕一響
and it won't attract anyone's attention	不會引起任何人的注意
just like when some time ago	就像在此之前

in a night just like this
a human being fell to the ground.

某個相同的夜晚
有個人掉在地上

The perfect synecdoche for the expendability of the migrant worker in the factory regime, “A Screw” is among the most cited of Xu’s poems. Its subject matter and thematics are common in the works of many authors, and it is likely that its frequent citation is directly driven by the fact that its final line evokes the Foxconn suicides, including the author’s. As Qin Xiaoyu rightly notes, the image of the screw in battlers poetry derives additional force from the contrast with its canonical reading in Mao-era poetry. There, it symbolizes the honor of contributing to the greater good as a tiny but indispensable component part of the revolutionary machine.²²

The Damaged Body and Death and Suicide

Now to subject matter and thematics that set Xu Lizhi’s poetry apart from other battlers poetry. A first domain is that of the damaged human body. This is frequently encountered in battlers poetry at large, but in Xu’s work it appears in extreme, idiosyncratic forms that bespeak profound alienation. When Xu paints the worker’s body as subjugated, abused, and damaged by machines, technology, and work regimes, this is not unlike the way it appears in writing by other battler poets—for instance, in the works of Zheng, Guo, and Xie, mentioned above. But strikingly, in Xu’s work the damage also manifests in sometimes masochistic scenes of physical disintegration, self-dismantlement, and self-destruction. We have already seen this in “Three Bones” (“what last night I collected / from inside my body: three bones”), “To the City for Work” (“with his ashes in his hands”), and “I Speak of Blood” (“my tongue breaks off”). It also occurs in what has become Xu’s signature text, “I’ve Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron . . .” 我嚥下一枚鐵做的月亮 . . . (Wo yanxia yi mei tie zuo de yueliang . . . [204]), written in December 2013:

I’ve swallowed a moon made of iron
they call it a screw

我嚥下一枚鐵做的月亮
他們管它叫做螺絲

I’ve swallowed the industry’s wastewater,
unemployment forms
our youth, lower than machines,
must perish before its time

我嚥下這工業的廢水，失業的訂單
那些低於機台的青春早早夭亡

I’ve swallowed hard work and swallowed
destitution and homelessness

我嚥下奔波，嚥下流離失所

swallowed footbridges and swallowed
this rusted-out life

嚥下人行天橋，嚥下長滿水鏽的生活

I can't swallow any more
everything I've swallowed roils up
in my throat

我再嚥不下了
所有我曾經嚥下的現在都從喉嚨洶
湧而出

and spreads across the motherland
a poem of shame.

在祖國的領土上鋪成一首
恥辱的詩

The poem foregrounds the damaging encounter of the human body with the hard materiality of battler life, through the vintage Xu Lizhi image—personal, physical, grotesque—of “swallowing” objects like a moon made of iron, as well as concepts like destitution and homelessness, which makes the speaker sick. Still, the poem retains a connection throughout with the migrant worker narrative as this is told in the public realm (media, government policy, etc.).

No such connection, however, is visible in “Washing Up” 洗澡 (Xizao [162]), written in September 2013:

first, with a razor
I slice an opening in my left wrist
and when the red in my veins comes
gushing out
I quickly catch it in a bucket
when the bucket is filled with blood
I grab the rag and start to wash myself
I scrub as hard as I can
scrub away the smell of sweat, scrub
away the filth
I hate not being clean so I scrub
some more
scrub away my skin my flesh my fat,
bit by bit
scrub away my liver my stomach my
kidneys my lungs, one by one
this is truly a very stimulating sight
now if I simply clench my teeth
and grind to powder the ten white
bones that clasp the rag
at last all that remains is the rag
like a shroud

我先用剃鬚刀
在左手腕上，劃開一道口子
趁著血管裡的紅開始湧出
我趕緊用水桶接住
等血放滿一桶
取下毛巾，我開始洗澡了
我使勁地搓
把汗腺搓掉把污垢搓掉
嫌不乾淨，我再搓
把皮肉脂肪一層層搓掉
把肝、胃、腎、肺一一搓掉
這情景確實令人振奮
我一咬牙
索性將握著毛巾的十根白骨嚼為齏粉
最後徒留那條毛巾
像裹屍布一樣

gently covering me down on the
ground.

將地板上的我，輕輕覆蓋

The sarcasm of “this is truly a very stimulating sight” is rare in battlers poetry. More important, the horrors in “Washing Up” are unrelated to anything that is identifiably to do with battler life. They are self-inflicted, aside from the question of what moves someone to annihilate himself this way.

A second domain that sets Xu Lizhi’s poetry apart from most other battlers poetry is that of death; again, we have already encountered several examples above.²³ Images of death, usually the speaker’s, occur throughout Xu’s oeuvre, often linked with heartrending expressions of despair. In “So How Much Did I Drink” 我究竟喝了多少 (Wo jiuqing he le duoshao [114]), the speaker predicts that his friends will know the answer once they scatter his ashes. In “The Poet and the Artisan” 詩人與匠人 (Shiren yu jiangren [118]), he is building his own coffin; and it is to a coffin that he compares the tiny, depressing space in “Rented Room” 出租室 (Chuzu shi [195]). In “Mystery Novel” 懸疑小說 (Xuanyi xiaoshuo [123]), he buys a flower vase online and has it couriered to where he lives—and when this takes a long time, he explains that this is because the poor courier boy needs to find him inside a grave. In “At Dusk, in Autumn” 秋天傍晚 (Qiutian bangwan [178]), he says,

I can be	我可能是
a shroud, a wreath	一件壽衣，一個花圈
a coffin, a mourning hall	一副棺材，一間靈堂
a tombstone, an abandoned grave	一塊墓碑，一座荒塚
but there is no way I can be	但我絕不可能是
a human being.	一個人

There are many more examples of a ubiquitous, pervasive morbidity, occasionally entangled with the harrowing, masochistic images of physical self-destruction discussed above. In “Life, or Death by a Thousand Cuts” 生活或凌遲 (Shenghuo huo lingchi [159]), for instance, it turns out that the sadistic punishment that gives the poem its name is administered to the speaker himself, by the speaker himself.

Death and morbidity, then—and suicide. Easily a dozen poems in Xu Lizhi’s oeuvre explicitly touch on suicide. In a few places this is linked to poethood. “Death of the Poet,” for instance, which starts with five ways of killing yourself (cited above), continues:

no matter in what sort of way	無論以哪種方式
you march toward death	走向死亡

as a qualified poet
you will always die of
suicide.

作為一名合格的詩人
你都將死於自殺

It is tempting to read this as irony, but there is something not right about this reflex within the context of Xu's oeuvre as a whole. In the ditty-like "Please Slap Me in the Face" 請給我一巴掌 (Qing gei wo yi ba zhang [164–65]), in four similar stanzas that start and end on the title phrase, the speaker expresses shame vis-à-vis his parents, his son ("I don't have the guts to sell one of my kidneys to buy my son an iPhone 5S" 我不敢賣腎給我兒子買 iPhone5S), his wife, and what may be called an ideal type of the poet. The final stanza runs:

please slap me in the face	請給我一巴掌
a poet who's afraid of death	作為詩人我怕死
I've lived until today without killing myself or planning to kill myself	我活到今天還沒自殺也沒打算自殺
I feel guilty toward the media and guilty toward the masses	我愧對媒體愧對大眾
I feel guilty toward the poetry critics and guilty toward poetry's history	我愧對詩評家愧對詩歌史
please slap me in the face.	請給我一巴掌

Again, while one could read this as an ironic send-up of romantic poethood and of the speaker himself, the rest of the poem and Xu's oeuvre as a whole strike me as too compellingly serious, or obsessed, to support this.

Other poems announce a suicide, most conspicuously several pieces written in July 2014. In "On My Deathbed" 我彌留之際 (Wo miliu zhi ji [226–27]), dated July 3, the speaker lists his final wishes (look at the ocean, climb a mountain, etc.) before saying "but these things I can no longer do / as I'm about to leave this world" 可是這些我都辦不到了/我就要離開這個世界了. The poem's final line, "I was fine when I came and I'm fine now that I'm going" 我來時很好，去時，也很好, provided the headline for a report on Xu's suicide in the *Shenzhen wanbao* 深圳晚報 (Shenzhen Evening News) of October 10, 2014.

Then there is the melancholy "I Know the Day Will Come" 我知道會有那麼一天 (Wo zhidao hui you name yi tian [230]), dated July 13, in which the speaker says,

those familiar and unfamiliar people	那些我認識的不認識的人
will enter my room	會走進我的房間
to collect my remains	收拾好我留下的殘骸
and wash away the darkened blood stains	清洗我淌滿地板的發黑的血跡
I've shed across the floor.	

He describes how they will clean the place up, help him finish all sorts of thing he didn't have time to finish, and quietly close the door. The poem makes for photo-genic material, and it was literally acted out in a film about battler poets directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue 吳飛越, with Xu, posthumously, as one of the main protagonists (more on this below).

Also dated July 13 is “I’m Nowhere Near the End of the Road in This Life” 我一生中的路還遠遠沒有走完 (Wo yi sheng zhong de lu hai yuanyuan mei you zou-wan [228–29]), which doesn’t mention suicide but is among the bleakest texts in what is a bleak oeuvre to begin with. It invokes destruction of the body yet again, now through paralysis. After the speaker’s physical collapse, he says:

I crave to stand up more than anyone	我比誰都渴望站起來
but my legs don’t respond	可是我的腿不答應
my stomach doesn’t respond	我的胃不答應
none of the bones in my body respond	我全身的骨頭都不答應
all I can do is lie flat like this	我只能這樣平躺著
in the dark sending out	在黑暗裡一次次地發出
silent alarm signals over and over	無聲的求救信號
and hear, over and over	再一次地聽到
the echo of despair.	絕望的迴響

In “Reunion” 團聚 (Tuanju [231–32]), dated July 20, the speaker returns to his native village. He says that, having lived through two of the twelve-year cycles in the Chinese calendar, he should be content with his lot (*zhizu* 知足, literally “know that it is enough”) and is returning to the village “carrying an age of slackness and a disease” 帶著一種鬆鬆垮垮的年齡和疾病. He describes how his relatives have left, one after the other, and the ancestral hall is dilapidated and looks like a tombstone. He feels guilty about having shown insufficient filial piety and invites his elders for a final feast, after which he says, “Your son will turn to a handful of ashes” 孩兒將化成一把骨灰 and reunite with his family as his ashes “scatter every which way” 四處飄散. The poem’s sentimentality hardly diminishes its emotional impact, also because it is part of what we may call a suicide series written in the space of a few weeks—or, indeed, a protracted suicide note.

The final poem in *A New Day* is titled “Three Stories” 故事三則 (Gushi san ze [233–36]), also dated July 21, 2014. It contains three texts. The first is called “Love Story” 愛情故事 (Aiqing gushi) and features a “you” 你 together with an “I” 我, in love. “You” and “I” grow old together. The poem’s final line reads “2013–2014.”

The second poem is called “Friendship Story” 友情故事 (Youqing gushi). The friendship turns out to be between “I” and “I.” This person explains that he has no friends but himself. The poem ends:

twenty-four years ago	二十四年前
without telling one another	我們沒有通知對方
we came to this world together	就一起來到了這世上
twenty-four years later	二十四年後
we are about to leave	我們就要離開了
this time	這一次
we've long since agreed on a time and a place	我們早早地約好了時間地點
and we are quietly waiting.	一起靜靜地等待著

The third poem is called “Kinship Story” 親情故事 (Qinqing gushi). The speaker says his little sister, big sister, father, and mother died many years ago. Expressing mild surprise at the memory, he asks if they were ever really in his life. He goes on, “These twenty-four years of mine / so who did I live them for” 我二十四年的生命/究竟是在為誰而活, and concludes that if his relatives and the ages at which they died might just be a fiction, this fiction may become reality as they see him live to twenty-four, that is, when he joins them in death. Both “Friendship Story” and “Kinship Story” end on a line that simply reads “1990–2014,” presumably signaling the speaker/author’s intention to end his life.

“Three Stories” concludes the coherent textual moment in July 2014 that is the suicide series. Having gone quiet in January, Xu starts posting poetry on his blog again in June. His silence coincides with his departure from Shenzhen after his first contract at Foxconn expired and he more or less went off the grid, keeping his family in the dark as to his whereabouts (there was talk of a move to Jiangsu and a—failed—love relationship). In late summer he returned to Shenzhen and to Foxconn, days before ending his life on September 30. His final blog entry, on July 31, contains the table of contents of a collection of a little over a hundred of his poems, which he calls *Dong shen le* 冬深了 (The Depth of Winter).

Qin Xiaoyu describes his struggle when he set about editing a collection of Xu’s poetry, as he hesitated between following the poet’s own program and using his farewell Weibo post, which had reached his followers at 0:00 hours on October 1, after his death in the early afternoon of the previous day.²⁴ The post simply read “A new day” 新的一天, and Qin made this the book’s title after all and included 186 poems, far more than Xu himself had chosen. One can see why, just like one can see why Qin clings to the forgivable cliché that Xu Lizhi lives on in his writing. And one can see why another editor might have decided otherwise.

Misfits

I hope to have shown that it is impossible to conduct a real discussion of Xu Lizhi’s poetry without referring to his suicide, the story of the migrant workers, and the entwinement of these two things. Allow me to revisit this point by adding some textual considerations to my identification of the force field of suicide

+ migrant worker icon + Foxconn + poethood as the primary reason for Xu's fame. This takes us to the question of his representativeness for battlers poetry, and from there to the ways in which battlers poetry has been framed in Chinese critical discourse to date.

In the suicide series of July 2014, the speaker's family situation in "Reunion" and "Three Stories" does not tally with that of the historical person Xu Lizhi, who is survived by his parents and an elder brother. That said, as text focused as we may aspire to be for certain aspects of literary research, in light of the specificity and the number of suicide announcements in Xu's final few poems, it doesn't make sense to block out what we know of the author's biography. (This is different from the observation, so emphatically implied by Yeh's essay on Haizi, that an author's biography should not automatically be allowed to straitjacket the oeuvre in question.)

Furthermore, when read as part of Xu's oeuvre as a whole, the suicide poems are powerful at the level of human compassion—as distinct from artistic appreciation, even as cultural production of the sort under scrutiny here questions this very dichotomy—because the poet's voice seamlessly connects them with his earlier writings, specifically with the idiosyncratic ways in which his oeuvre reflects the story of the migrant workers, in what he says and how he says it.

To recapitulate, quite aside from the fact that Xu's fame is a consequence of his suicide, his poetry is very much worth the reader's while; the issue is, rather, whether Xu's status as one of the figureheads and a key representative of battlers poetry holds up. Aside from the coverage of Xu's suicide in the general media in China and elsewhere—from the *Shenzhen Evening News* to *Time* and many other foreign magazines and newspapers—which gave him an infinitely wider exposure than those who live on, a telling example of how Xu acquired this status in the field of cultural production is his posthumous portrayal by Qin Xiaoyu.²⁵ The steps in this process are (1) the publication in March 2015 of Xu's poetry collection, *A New Day*; (2) the publication in August 2015 of *Wo de shipian: Dangdai gongren shidian* 我的詩篇：當代工人詩典 (My Poems: The Canon of Contemporary Workers Poetry), a large multiple-author anthology, with battlers poetry at its core (Qin prefers to call it rural migrant worker poetry); (3) over a thousand screenings throughout China of the abovementioned film directed by Qin and Wu, also called *Wo de shipian* 我的詩篇 (My Poems), and festival screenings outside China of an international edition called *Iron Moon* from November 2015 and continuing into 2017; (4) the film's nationwide cinema release in China early in 2017, and its pay-per-view availability on the Chinese Internet; and (5) the publication of an English-language collection of battlers poetry edited by Qin and translated by Eleanor Goodman, called—after the poem reviewed above—*Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*, in late 2016.²⁶

The blurb on the back flap of *A New Day* says the book "achieves glory" (*liyan* 立言) for over 200 million travel companions of the same fate (i.e., migrant

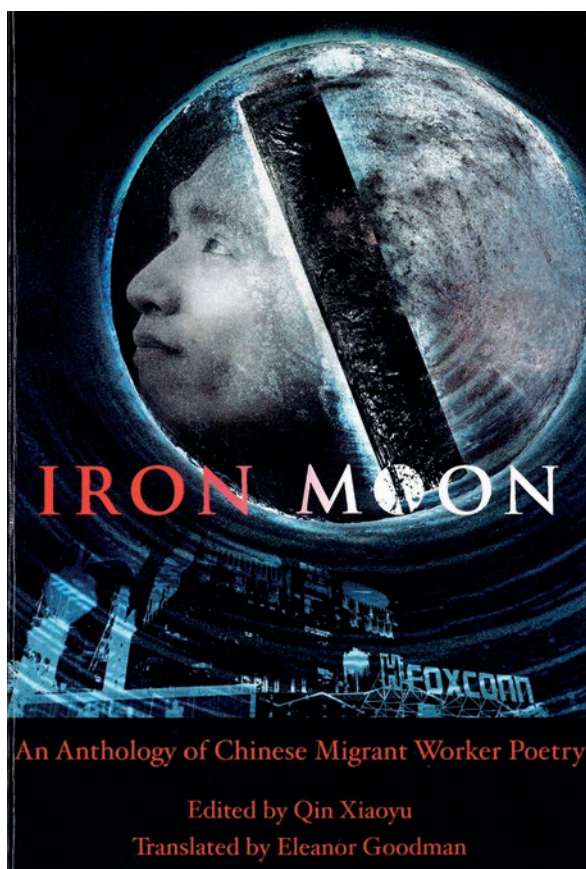


FIGURE 1. The cover of the book *Iron Moon*.

workers) and “bears witness” (*zuozheng* 作證) to subaltern life. Six months on, in *My Poems*, Xu takes center stage. The youngest poet featured in the anthology, he gets a large number of pages, and Qin discusses his work admiringly in the introduction. Two months later, Xu’s story was central to the narrative in the film, even though—or, precisely because—he had committed suicide before shooting began in late 2014. The overall representation becomes one of pure good (Xu) in the face of pure evil (Foxconn). Finally, *Iron Moon*, book and film alike, literally paint Xu as a figurehead of battlers poetry in the artwork used for the book’s cover (see fig. 1) and for advertising the international edition of the film. His face, from one of a small set of photographs that are all over the web, is encircled by the head of a screw resembling a giant iron moon, over a hellish-looking Foxconn.²⁷

But Xu Lizhi as a figurehead of the genre is a misfit. First of all, as I have argued, in terms of subject matter and thematics his poetry stands apart from battlers poetry at large by its idiosyncratic style and its explorations of the damaged body and of death and suicide, whose presentation is not primarily

connected with the story of the migrant workers, and sometimes not connected with it at all.

Second, a feature of Xu's writing that is rare in the work of other battler poets is that it regularly bespeaks a desire to associate with (specialist) poetry and poet-hood per se. These texts show the speaker identifying as a poet, albeit uneasily so in that they often convey a sense of insufficient recognition or of failure. Several contain clichés of poethood, but in ways that make it difficult to sustain an ironic reading, as mentioned earlier.²⁸ Xu's poetry also makes scattered reference to poets who are household names in China, such as Qu Yuan, Li Bai 李白 (701–62), and Li Yu 李煜 (937–78), and the speaker's encounters with these premodern greats are of a notably personal kind.²⁹ In "Anxiety" 擔憂 (Danyou [18]), for instance, he escapes from his despair by turning himself into a Song-dynasty *ci*-poet leaning against the railing of a balcony and gazing into the distance, and in "Unsolvable" 無解 (Wujie [106]), he wonders why Li Bai won't accept his friendship request on the QQ messaging service. Moving into the contemporary era, in "Emptiness" 空 (Kong [108]) the speaker names groups within avant-garde poetry that are barely known outside the avant-garde in-crowd. And the back cover of *A New Day* quotes Xu as comparing himself to Virginia Woolf, familiarity with whose work definitely comes under specialist literary discourse.

Xu is not alone in his conversation with (canonized, specialist) poets. Zheng Xiaoqiong's work, for instance, also contains references to premodern poets, and Guo Jinniu has famously called himself a "poetry-writing impostor" or "phony poet" (*xie shi de pianzi* 寫詩的騙子) who does some cynical name-dropping for credibility (Eliot, Hölderlin, Haizi); more generally, the right of "battler poets" to become simply "poets" is a hot topic.³⁰ Yet, Xu stands apart by the awkward manner in which he positions himself vis-à-vis literary history and the contemporary poetry scene, in a blend of intimacy, envy, and insecurity; both Zheng and Guo come across as much more self-assured. And again, importantly, the texts in question do little if anything in the way of establishing a connection with the story of the migrant workers at large.

A third reason for questioning Xu's alleged representativeness for battlers poetry at large has to do with a change in his writing that occurs during his brief literary career. There is a marked difference between, roughly, the years 2010–12 and the years 2013–14, in two respects. Whereas in the first three years there are glimmers of hope and moments of resistance, and there is a certain engagement with the question of how to find a livable future, the later poetry exudes a mood that is ever more desperate, bleak, and resigned (the anger in "I Speak of Blood" and "I've Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron" is the exception to the rule).

Also, and related to the previous point, there is a shift from the public to the private. The speaker moves from a worried engagement with his surroundings to despondent introspection, and his central thematic moves from the indictment

of social injustice to personal grief and self-destruction. The voice in this poetry appears hardly interested in bearing witness or, for that matter, in being persuasive at all. It has turned inward, and it regularly signals an inability to cope with life that is not explained by circumstance. We read a displacement that goes far beyond the nostalgia for the rural hometown and the social alienation that are common themes in battlers poetry at large. If Xu's figurehead status is an externally imposed misfit in public discourse, this displacement is a misfit that is existential in nature and occurs *inside* the speaker/author. It manifests poignantly in what I have called the moments of despair in Xu's work, and it casts doubt on the widespread assumption that, at the end of the day, Xu's suicide is simply another chapter in the story of the migrant workers.

Thus, if in the first two years of Xu's published writing the relation between word and world is close to one to one, the shift from public to private makes this much less true for his later work. Xu's later poems are certainly not of the radical-formalist defamiliarizing kind, but they do show him moving away from referentiality and paraphrasability, away from the instrumental and toward the expressive, with the latter notion foregrounding subjectivity as well as attention to the act of expression itself.³¹ Rather than two pigeonholes, the distinction of instrumental and expressive provides coordinates for determining whether we are looking at migrant labor activism that happens to take the form of poetry or at the manifestation of an (innate) poethood that happens to take migrant labor as its subject matter—for Xu, and for battlers poetry at large. This is the kind of question that will be triggered by cultural production associated with particular groups and identities, and it is not an either/or question for battlers poetry any more than for women's literature or Asian cinema. But it helps us place Xu's poetry with reference to other battler poets and to see that he stands apart.

Specifically, it is difficult to fit Xu Lizhi's poetry into the dyad of high social significance (*shehui yiyi* 社會意義) and low aesthetic value (*shenmei jiazhi* 審美價值) that has dominated the reception of battlers poetry in Chinese critical discourse.³² This is not to say that his poetry has no social significance, or that its significance is no different from that of many avant-garde oeuvres, or that it has not been amplified hundredfold by the publicity that followed his suicide. But Xu's oeuvre includes many texts that differ appreciably from the typical battlers poetry template or are alien to it, and these are organically part of his writing. The aesthetic of his work is most palpable in its gripping imagery, occasionally supported by the use of repetition, and often thrown into sharp relief by a tone of deep vulnerability. As such, in a number of Xu's poems that is considerable when measured against the brevity of his career, it is safe to say that communicative, goal-oriented functions of language are sidelined by others, even if his work does not appear to be the chiseled-down result of rewriting and polishing and/or the residue of a conscious poetic program.

What Kind of Social Significance, and Whose Aesthetics?

The dyad of high social significance and low aesthetic value merits further reflection for battlers poetry at large.³³ Of course, it is not as if it either fully applies to an oeuvre or a genre or does not apply at all. And there are other battler poets whose work it will not easily accommodate, even if Xu stands out among them (Zheng Xiaoqiong, Guo Jinniu, and Xie Xiangnan are, again, cases in point); indeed, it is tempting to ask if this “naturally” ensures success.³⁴ However, this is not borne out by the reception of battlers poetry, which has been notably mixed. Its place in literary history is a source of disagreement.³⁵ Moreover, the high-low dyad is ultimately unsatisfying in that it begs the question also raised by typologies of the sort I have been circling, of the social and (or versus) the aesthetic, and of the instrumental and (or versus) the expressive: success in whose eyes? And from there: what kind of social significance is this about, and whose aesthetics?

One measure of social significance is the number of readers that are reached by battlers poetry in one way or another, and this poetry's power to effect social change. If we take a bird's-eye view of the social significance of contemporary Chinese poetry as this has developed over the years, a schematic periodization could run from the political lyric of the Mao era to the early avant-garde poetry of the late 1970s and the 1980s, specifically the obscure poetry whose authors enjoyed nationwide fame; then to later avant-garde poetry, especially from the 1990s onward; and finally to battlers poetry.³⁶ The political lyric had a great deal of social significance in the above, quantitative sense, not least because as political propaganda it was a product of the state's cultural policy, whose infrastructure guaranteed wide exposure. By contrast, obscure poetry was a bottom-up phenomenon, even as it displayed clear continuities with the political lyric. It had considerable social significance through its association with resistance and its status as a (elite) cultural expression of social change immediately after the Cultural Revolution, before other arts and media pushed it away from center stage. The frequent characterization of later avant-garde poetry as marginal will not stick if it is considered as part of an overarching category of modern poetries around the world; at the same time, even though the poetry scene displays enormous vitality, the later avant-garde has had nothing like the early avant-garde's anchorage in social change—and, hence, nothing like its visibility beyond the in-crowd, and nothing like its social significance.³⁷

Battlers poetry, on the other hand, does have such anchorage, visibility, and significance. Different from obscure poetry, it is widely considered a subaltern (*diceng* 底層) cultural expression of social change, and it involves literally countless authors.³⁸ Similar to obscure poetry, while battlers poetry's emergence led to a certain unease in critical discourse, it has since garnered praise and seen a degree of canonization (incidentally, this has gone hand in hand with attacks on the later avant-garde).³⁹ As regards battlers poetry's power to effect social change,

aside from the individual advancement of a handful of authors, this is difficult to assess. At any rate, the question of whether this poetry can help improve the lot of the migrant workers and mitigate inequality in Chinese society has featured centrally in the debate from the beginning.

As for battlers poetry's aesthetic value, inasmuch as reader assessments that do more than like/dislike are recorded in writing, they are overwhelmingly by specialist readers. So, aside from the fact that this is not a homogeneous group in terms of poetics, how relevant is their assessment to this poetry's amateur readers? An easy answer would be that it is irrelevant, or that it would be patronizing to bother amateur readers with specialist assessments.

But one could equally claim that it would be patronizing not to do so, because the intended audience of important segments of battlers poetry's includes the literary specialists, in addition to the migrant workers themselves and whoever is in a position to help fight social inequality. Clearly, at least some of the many poetry-writing migrant workers aspire to recognition beyond the battler circuit and defy the stereotype that migrant workers are lowly educated or low-literate people. The story of Liu Dongwu 柳冬嫻 (1973–), an authority on the genre, may illustrate the point. One of the earliest battler poets himself, he recalls being a poetry buff in high school in rural Anhui, memorizing lots of obscure poetry (and reading lots of Nietzsche; his is a typical 1980s story of “high culture fever” [*wenhua re* 文化熱]). After graduating he followed other local youths in migrating to Dongguan in search of work—and then made his way to reading and writing for a living within a few years, through sheer perseverance and some lucky breaks, first as a freelance editor and copywriter and then as a cultural official.⁴⁰

In any event, the high-low dyad is problematic inasmuch as it rests on a kind of zero-sum thinking in which high social significance automatically means low aesthetic value—and potentially neutralizes the battler poets at the very moment of their recognition, dispelling the need to take their writing seriously and to ask, Whose aesthetics? Even if no such thinking is in evidence, social significance and aesthetic value cannot be neatly disentangled. Nor can they be generalized for the heterogeneous body of writing that is battlers poetry, or for its various audiences.

On Its Own Terms

The discourse on battlers poetry is a fascinating installment of the perennial debate on poetry's relation to society, and on the question of who gets to write poetry, to read it, and to evaluate it—and to be recognized as doing these things. Poetry's relation to society is, of course, particularly salient in China. In recent literary history, this is illustrated by not just battlers poetry but also, closely related, the huge popularity of Yu Xiuhua 余秀華 (1976–). Yu is an amateur poet who has taken the country by storm since 2014 and, like Zheng Xiaoqiong, turned herself into a specialist poet in the process.⁴¹ But the early twenty-first century has seen poetry

rejecting the safe confines of elite culture in other places, too, and generating controversy in the process. If we allow for the substitution of a few variables, the attack on Yu by veteran poet Guo Lusheng 郭路生 (aka Shizhi 食指, 1948–) in early 2018 leads to association with British poet Rebecca Watts’s diatribe, at around the same time, against the works of Indian-Canadian Instagram poet Rupi Kaur and poets and British spoken-word artists Kate Tempest and Hollie McNish.⁴² Watts relegates their poetry to “the cult of the noble amateur,” her core argument being that poetry is an art form that requires intellectual engagement and craft. A noble amateur is different from a noble savage, a stereotype that is ready to accommodate the battler poet, as I have suggested above—but not *that* different.

Xu Lizhi complicates orderly classifications of battlers poetry, and battlers poetry complicates orderly classifications of literature. Among other things, this may help us revisit the notion of engaging with literature “on its own terms”—also, or especially, for literatures that claim less artistic autonomy than the texts that tend to make it into the canon.

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Some of the issues addressed in this essay were first identified in van Crevel, “Tegen het overzicht,” accompanying my Dutch translations of poetry by Xu Lizhi for a general audience; and I have borrowed the occasional turn of phrase (and a photograph of the cover of Qin Xiaoyu, *Iron Moon*) from other recent publications (e.g., van Crevel, “Cultural Translation”; see note 7), as my current research involves several interrelated subprojects on battlers poetry. I am grateful to the two anonymous *Prism* reviewers for their inspiring comments.

Notes

- 1 Xu L., *Xin de yi tian*, 177. All poems cited are from this book, and hereafter page numbers are provided in square brackets in the main text. “Three Bones,” “Washing Up,” and excerpts from a few other poems are my translations. Other translations in this essay cite verbatim or rely heavily on beautiful previous renditions by Eleanor Goodman, who has kindly let me consult her new, unpublished translations of Xu Lizhi’s poetry alongside her translations in Qin, *Iron Moon*.
- 2 Xi, “Haizi.”
- 3 In this essay, *China* and *Chinese* refer to mainland China.
- 4 See Schneider, *Madman of Ch’u*.
- 5 See van Crevel, “Walk on the Wild Side,” pars 89–90, 111–12. Below, I use these terms in their local, Chinese sense.
- 6 See van Crevel, “Avant-garde Poetry.”
- 7 English-language scholarship on battlers poetry to date includes Sun, *Subaltern China* (chap. 7); Jaguścik, “Representation of *Dagongmei*”; Jaguścik, “Literary Body

Discourses" (chap. 5); Inwood, "Between License and Responsibility"; Gong H., "Toward a New Leftist Ecocriticism"; Zhou, "Scenes from the Global South in China"; Zhou, "Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poems"; Zhou, "'Slow Violence' in Migrant Landscapes"; van Crevel, "Review of *Iron Moon*"; van Crevel, "Walk on the Wild Side," pars 98–108; van Crevel, "Cultural Translation"; Dooling, "Representing *Dagongmei*"; and Goodman, "Translating Migrant Worker Poetry." Together, these publications reference a wealth of Chinese-language source materials and commentary. Battlers literature also includes fiction, reportage, and essays; for a comprehensive study, see Liu, *Dagong wenxue*. Xu Lizhi's blog is still online, at m.blog.sina.com.cn/u/1766211094 (accessed March 9, 2018).

- 8 In a nutshell, because it comes closest to *dagong shige*. The Chinese term is contested but looks like it is here to stay. Different from other labels that have been given to this poetry, it actually means something to all of the parties involved: practitioners and commentators, cultural officials and general readers, fans and skeptics. See van Crevel, "Review of *Iron Moon*"; van Crevel, "Cultural Translation," 246; and van Crevel, "Walk on the Wild Side," pars. 98–99.
- 9 *Fushikang ren* 富士康人 [Foxconn People], an internal newsletter of Xu's employer, also carried some of his work, but this would not have reached beyond the plant.
- 10 Xu Q. and Chen Zhongcun, 2014 *Nian*, 102.
- 11 E.g., He and Bai, "Shiren"; Zou, "Zhe ge shijie"; Wei, "Xu Lizhi"; Han, "Dagong shiren"; and Song and Li, "'Shenfen' yu 'shenfen zhi shi'."
- 12 The death (and the suicide) of the poet is a frequent topic in publications for a general audience, e.g., Alvarez, *Savage God*; and, more recently, Farley and Roberts, *Deaths of the Poets*. For scientific research on poets and suicide, see Stirman and Pennebaker, "Word Use"; and Pająk and Trzebiński, "Escaping the World." On suicide in modern Chinese poetry, see Yeh, "'Cult of Poetry,'" 62–64; and van Crevel, "Anything Chinese?"
- 13 See, e.g., Qiu and Lin, "Foxconn."
- 14 See van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 100–101. Luo did not die by his own hand but was dragged into the suicide discourse by his close association with Haizi.
- 15 Finch, "Formalism."
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 See Qin, *Wo de shipian*; and Ning, "Political Lyric." Qin's use of the term *workers poetry* is likely tactical. His central concern is clearly with battlers poetry, but explicitly making this his frame of reference would likely have led to censorship. Tellingly, poetry from the Mao era is tucked away in an appendix in *Wo de shipian*, and the anthology's table of contents lists no individual authors.
- 18 See, e.g., Lepillez, "Dark Side"; Koehn, "Continuation of Slavery"; Qiu and Lin, "Foxconn" (scholarship); *China Labour Bulletin*, "From Shanxi to Dongguan"; International Coalition against Human Trafficking, "What Goes On" (activism); and Lague, "China Tries to Contain Scandal" (journalism).
- 19 See van Crevel, "Cultural Translation," 258–66.
- 20 On Zheng Xiaoqiong, see the scholarship listed in note 7. On her career, see van Crevel, "Cultural Translation," 255–57. Zheng herself and several critics have rightly noted that, especially in recent years, her work extends beyond the usual thematics of battlers poetry.
- 21 See Zheng, *Nügong ji*.
- 22 Qin, *Wo de shipian*, 50.
- 23 This is duly observed in Chinese-language commentary to date, and especially elaborated in He and Bai, "Shiren," but not mobilized for an analysis of Xu Lizhi's work in relation to battlers poetry at large, as in the present essay.

- 24 Qin, *Wo de shipian*, 237–39.
- 25 Academic and literary criticism chimed in but would have had a more limited reach.
- 26 Xu L., *Xin de yi tian*; Qin, *Wo de shipian*; Qin and Wu, *Wo de shipian*; Qin, *Iron Moon*.
- 27 See van Crevel, “Review of *Iron Moon*”; and van Crevel, “Cultural Translation,” 278–79.
- 28 In addition to “Death of the Poet” and “Please Slap Me in the Face,” this category includes “With a Title” 有題 (You ti [196]; the title puns on *wu ti* 無題, a conventional phrase for “naming” poems without a title), “To the Poet” 致詩人 (Zhi shiren [175]), and “The Poet and the Artisan”; and “Night Shift” 夜班 (Yeban [209]), through an allusion to Gu Cheng.
- 29 In addition to the poems mentioned in the main text, these include “The Poet and the Artisan,” “Moonlit Lake” 月光湖面 (Yueguang humian [173]), and “Journey to the North” 北遊記 (Beiyou ji [158]).
- 30 Guo, *Zhi shang*, 23.
- 31 Tihanov, “Russian Formalism.”
- 32 See, e.g., articles in the special section in *Wenyi zhengming* 文藝爭鳴 (Debate in Literature and Art) no. 3 (2005): Jiang S., “Xianshi guanhuai”; Liu, “Cong xiangcun”; Zhang Q., “‘Diceng shengcun xiezu’”; and Zhang W., “Guanyu.” But there are many other examples, e.g., Gong K., “‘Dagong shige’”; Jiang L., “Yuanshengtai”; Huo, “Shige”; Qian, “Daode guizu”; Luo, “Bei xianshi” Also see van Crevel, “Cultural Translation,” 266–76.
- 33 See Goodman, “Translating Migrant Worker Poetry.”
- 34 Cf. Zhang Q., “Shei chumodao le shidai de tie.”
- 35 See note 32.
- 36 This does not extend to modern classical-style poetry. See van Crevel, “Walk on the Wild Side,” pars 91–92.
- 37 van Crevel, “Avant-Garde Poetry”; van Crevel, “Walk on the Wild Side.”
- 38 As such, it is often discussed in conjunction with “subaltern literature” (*diceng wenxue* 底層文學). See Zhong, “Internationale as Specter.”
- 39 See van Crevel, “Cultural Translation,” 266–76.
- 40 Ibid., 268–69.
- 41 See van Crevel, “Walk on the Wild Side,” pars. 109–12.
- 42 Xu X., “Two Poets”; and Watts, “Cult of the Noble Amateur.”

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